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Workplace Bullying – A Complex Issue Needing IR/ HRM Research?

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Workplace bullying encompasses a wide array of targeted, persistent and destructive behaviours, usually by managers towards their subordinates. It is an extensive and seemingly growing phenomenon which is costly to individuals, workplaces and organisations. The costs for organisations include productivity loss, turnover, and increased legal and insurance costs. There are also considerable costs to individuals and the ethical capital of organisations, but this is more difficult to measure. Curiously IR and HRM scholars have rarely undertaken systematic investigation or analysis of the issue, despite the fact that it appears to be an issue squarely within the purview of these disciplines. The paper concludes that further research from IR/HRM perspective would benefit transdisciplinary investigation and analysis of bullying in ways that might assist in devising organisation and public policy and practices which, in turn, could reduce the extent and impact of bullying

Workplace Bullying: Researching a complex phenomenon

> A deadly combination of economic rationalism, increasing competition, "downsizing," and the current fashion for tough, dynamic, "macho" management styles have created a culture in which bullying can thrive, producing "toxic" workplaces. Such workplaces perpetuate dysfunction, fear, shame, and embarrassment, intimidating those who dare to speak out and nurturing a silent epidemic (MacAvoy and Murtagh, 2003).

Workplace bullying is a growing problem which is costly for organisations and individual victims. The costs for organisations, not only come from the loss of productivity but also from insurance costs. As the levels of stress claims rise, increased payouts generate concomitant rises in premiums, while outcomes of bullying such as staff turnover, redundancy costs and management of grievances have led the Workplace Bullying and Violence research team based in the Department of Management at Griffith University to calculate bullying costs in Australia to be between $17b and $36b per annum (McCarthy and Mayhew, 2004; See also e.g. Millar 2005; (Anon, 2001; Aldred 2003; Wojcik, 2005; Breslin, 2005). Workplace bullying encompasses a wide array of targeted, persistent and destructive behaviours mostly by managers to their subordinates. It is an extensive and seemingly growing phenomenon which is costly to individuals, workplaces and organisations.

It is not only in the private sector that bullying is increasing. While the health sector demonstrates long-standing patterns of bullying, evidence suggests that it has become particularly apparent across many public sector activities in recent years, including education and the public service. (Mayhew and McCarthy, 2005; Lewis, 2004; Lipsett, 2005a) This is perhaps not surprising. Public sector organisations are dealing with multiple pressures and strains as never before. Frequently they are required not only to uphold and advance their traditional service roles, but also to meet increasingly stringent financial and productivity requirements, and even expand their income-generating roles in new and entrepreneurial ways.

This paper seeks to understand the nature of bullying from the perspectives of scholars and practitioners in different fields of study in order to identify the strengths of each area of study. It will be argued that while there is extensive empirical and analytical research, further

research from scholars in HRM and IR could provide insights which may achieve greater effectiveness in dealing with this costly issue. The paper will begin by first discussing the nature and extent of bullying, followed by a brief overview of the different approaches to bullying. The paper concludes that further research from IR/HRM perspective would benefit transdisciplinary investigation and analysis of bullying in ways that might assist in devising organisation and public policy and practices which could reduce the extent and impact of bullying.

Defining Bullying: Nature and extent

Regardless of the disciplinary origins of researchers there is a great deal of similarity in the definitions of workplace bullying. For example, Salin specifies

> Repeated and persistent negative acts including social isolation, silent treatment, rumours attacking victim's private life or attitudes, excessive criticism or monitoring, withholding information, depriving responsibility, verbal aggression (Salin, 2003).

while in Australia, the well-known bullying research group at Griffith University delineates workplace bullying as

> Repeated, unreasonable efforts to humiliate, offend, slander, exclude, show lack of support or threaten recipients … (McCarthy et al., 2003).

and lawyer Joe Catanzariti, draws on state OHS agencies and particularly the NSW Law Society definition of

> Unreasonable and inappropriate workplace behaviour includes bullying, which comprises behaviour that intimidates, offends, degrades, insults or humiliates a worker, possibly in front of co-workers, clients or customers, and which includes physical or psychological behaviour (Catanzariti, 2003; see also Catanzariti, 2004).

It is the same with definitions from scholars and practitioners from other disciplines. They vary in the nuances but bullying is seen to encompass a large number of behaviours with the core descriptors of repeated, unreasonable and destructive. Generally researchers follow their definition with a range of examples of bullying behaviours.

Some researchers have sought to identify bullying by exploring the attributes of victims or targets. Thus far this has been of mixed success since it appears that, unlike school bullying, there are few clear and agreed target typologies, except that women are more likely to be targets than men and that targets tend to be non-confrontational and unlikely to 'fight back' (Lehoczky, 2004). As Namie (2003) has noted of bully targets in the USA "The attribute common to all targets is that they are unwilling or unable to react to unwarranted aggression with aggression … any more than sexual harassment targets invite undesirable assaults" (Namie, 2003; see also Wornham, 2003; jfo; Einarson et al, 2003).

On the other hand, in recent years the focus has turned to some extent to the characteristics of bullies and bullying behaviours which may provide insights for policy-makers. The gender difference is not great - men and women are bullies, and in a majority, but not all, cases bullies are the targets' supervisors or managers. Other characteristics are not clear, perhaps because self-reporting of bullying by bullies is rare, and while co-workers are generally aware of who are the bullies, they are unlikely to report on the bully's attributes. It is notable that while the careers of targets are frequently disrupted or terminated, bullies rarely experience suffer career setbacks because a bully's supervisors have been found either to side with the bully or to ignore the evidence (Namie, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). As McAvoy and Murtagh (2003) have noted, 'tough' management can become a euphemism for bullying.

More specifically, recent bullying research has sought to explain bullying by the types of behaviours practised by bullies. For example, clinical psychologist Keryl Egan suggests that

Table 1. A Typology of Bullying

Types of bully/ Attributes and response	***Under pressure (accidental)***	***Vulnerable; Insecure (Narcissistic)***	***Psychopathic***
Motivation	Achievement Following orders Survival	Praise Recognition Entitlement	Self-interest Power, Money
Degree of Intentional harm	Harm to others is unintentional; A lesser evil in service of organizational goals; Expects resilience	Justifies harm to others for own psychological survival; Shame prone, may pay back for humiliation	Plans harm to others in interest of self; Gratuitous violence and deliberate covert assaults
Fragmented Responses to Effective Challenge	Anxiety rages depression Agitation	Rage, anxiety. Defends grandiose view of the self Tragi-comic, ridiculous claims	Threats, including litigation; Plays the victim; Criminality unmasked, risks exposure; Bullying behaviour intensifies
Coachability	May have lost sight of both goals and humanity Can be confronted and coached re behaviour Can change with acceptable costs	Counselling, can develop with considerable personal development work; Organisation must uphold vision & values; Uphold strong limits & boundaries; Costs considerable, but talents may be worth it	Cannot change with counselling or therapy; Self interest predominates; Resists accountability; Costs will always outweigh imagined benefits; Organization should seek exit

Source: Egan 2005b

bullying behaviour moves along a continuum with three clearly identifiable types marking differences in bullying behaviours. The basis for the typology reflects the motivation, intentionality, responses to challenge and capacity for coaching. Thus, Egan notes

> Accidental bullying includes insensitive, aggressive and demanding behaviours which have as their aim some 'higher good' such as … reaching high standards, beating the competition or the financial survival of the company. … they regard tough, insensitive and driven behaviour as normal in a pressured workplace. The health and well-being of others is … secondary to primary business goals. Such people are often shocked when they are made aware of the consequences of their attitudes and actions (Egan, 2005a).

Narcissistic bullying is further along the continuum of severity. It is often evident in highly motivated or talented individuals, and is characterised by "destructive, self-absorbed attitudes and behaviours, a lack of empathy, blaming, nitpicking, devaluing others, lies, boasting and taking credit for others' work." (Egan 2005b).

The most destructive behaviour is that of the psychopathic bully who deliberately seeks to destroy others through fear, whisper campaigns, marginalisation and destabilisation. Egan notes that psychopathic bullies have considerable capacity to engender widespread confidence in their abilities and are highly effective at managing upwards. This means that their destructive behaviours do not become apparent for some time. It is also unlikely that they will change their behaviours (See also Clarke 2004; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Clarke, 2004; ABC 2005). As was shown in Table One the different kinds of bullying behaviour will tend to generate different responses to accusations of bullying, with some bullies highly amenable to changing behaviours with appropriate coaching. By contrast, while psychopathic bullies will resist efforts to begin behavioural changes. This very complexity is one reason why there needs to be greater understanding, awareness and analysis of bullying if effective organisational and public policies are to be developed.

The extent of bullying

It is difficult to measure the extent of bullying in a workplace or organisation because it depends to a fair extent on self-reporting, and the definitions or attributes of bullying used in employee surveys. For example Salin (2001) found that different perceptions of the levels of bullying depended on the criteria or definition applied by the researcher. Professional employees who were given a general definition of bullying and then asked if they had been bullied indicated much lower level of bullying (8.8 per cent) than those who were provided a list of pre-defined negative acts and then asked which they had experienced (24 per cent).

Moreover, some researchers believe bullying is greatly under-reported, perhaps for the reasons noted by Egan (2005a) and others (see e.g. Lipsett, 2005a; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003) that targets withdraw perceiving that they are at fault or that there is no possible redress (see e.g. Wornham, 2003). Reporting on a major newspaper survey of bullying in higher education in the UK, Lipsett (2005b) noted that a major finding was that "Respondents saw university HR departments as protecting institutions and helping bullies rather than victims". In these respects, approaches to bullying may be likened to earlier approaches to other forms of relationship deviance such as domestic violence and racial or sexual harassment, insofar as the lack of wider recognition of the nature and extent of the phenomenon limits early recognition or acceptance. Moreover, if unrecognised, ignored or accepted bullying can become embedded in a workplace culture as spiralling fear and copycat behaviours develop so that under-reporting occurs simply because employees accept bullying as the norm (Shallcross, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003).

In a recent UK survey of nurses, (Sweet, 2005) seventeen per cent reported having been bullied in the previous year, yet this is lower than other surveys such as that by Cusack (2004) who results showed that not only had 38 per cent had experienced bullying but a higher percentage (42 per cent) had observed co-workers being bullied. These latter results are similar to those found in New South Wales nursing where Rutherford and Rissel (2004) reported that, taking a broad definition of bullying, fifty per cent had experienced one or more forms of bullying in the previous twelve months. Nor is bullying confined to the health sector. A recent survey of bank workers in New Zealand found that 43 per cent of employees had experienced bullying, while in the UK a survey of personnel / human resources managers found that an impressive 87 per cent had experienced bullying. (Anon, 2004) In a broad survey of householders in Michigan, USA in 2000, 16.7 per cent of respondents reported having experienced severe disruption at work from bullying behaviours in the previous year. Clearly the evidence of bullying depends on the breadth and specificity of definition, but as Namie (2003) notes it can be extrapolated that about one in six employees experiences

bullying in the USA and other research suggests this proportion is understated. In other words, while difficult to measure and to compare, there is clear evidence that workplace bullying is extensive enough to be of concern to researchers, managers, non-managerial employees, unionists, and policy-makers. Moreover, the changing nature of work and increasing demands on organisations to meet relentless pressures for reduced costs, especially in the form of increased labour productivity, act to boost the likelihood and acceptance of bullying. In this respect rigorous research is important for raising awareness and influencing public and organisation policy and action.

Research into Workplace Bullying

Most research and practical development into workplace bullying has been done by researchers and professionals in four areas – the bullying professionals, lawyers, psychologists and trade unions.

The bullying professionals are those individuals and organisations established specifically to develop resources and research on workplace bullying. It seems likely that the founding father was Heinz Leymann who began a work trauma clinic in Sweden in the 1980s and has published his extensive research since then (Leymann 1990). Others have included bully professionals such as Ruth and Gary Namie in North America. They have counselled several thousand targets and published articles in business journals and popular media alike in order to highlight the effect of bullying, and more recently forms of preventing and treating it (Namie, 2003). In the UK the Andrea Adams Trust has been highly effective in publicising bullying, while bully professional Tim Field developed a large database on bullying, published popular books and provided public seminars and training courses over nearly a decade (Bullying survey, Bullyonline). In New Zealand, Hayden Olsen and Andrea Needham are well-known for their work treating targets and advising on workplace bullying. (see e.g.Olsen, 2005) In Australia much of the work of bully professionals has been undertaken by public organisations such as the Employee Ombudsman in South Australia and by occupational health and safety agencies.

Not surprisingly the focus of *lawyers* has been on ways of introducing or using legislation to prevent bullying, punish bullies or compensate the targets. In Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, aspects of bullying can be taken up indirectly through occupational health and safety legislation. Acts. Catanzariti (2003, 2004), for example, shows how OHS legislation, regulations and guidelines in NSW, Victoria and Western Australia emphasise employers' duty of care to make a workplace wholly safe for employees. Indeed, asserts Catanzariti, such a duty of care may now extend to individual directors 'where the employer has failed to take all reasonable steps to prevent it from occurring". He goes on to point out that it is unnecessary to prove an employee has sustained psychological or physical injuries, but only that employees were at risk and employers failed to take reasonable steps to prevent that risk. (Catanzariti, 2004, p.17)

It seems likely that most scholarly research and much of the practical research, has been undertaken by *psychologists*. In part this reflects psychologists' roles in counselling targets. As well, psychology is rigorous in its processes of quantifying and measuring psychological outcomes, so that to a fair extent their work is characterised by certainty in measuring change. Traditionally psychologists have taken a medical and individualist approach to bullying. That is, whether dealing with individuals or workplaces, they have used terms such as "preventing psychological injury". In this respect, psychologists such as Peter Cotton and Peter Hart have initiated proactive programmes which draw on the notion of organisational climate as a means

to enhance organisational health. For these practitioner scholars, the term *organisational climat*e refers to ten core dimensions of workplace or organisational attributes including

> employee perceptions and evaluations of leadership practices, decision-making processes, working relationships among employees, appraisal and recognition, as well as roles and goals. Organisational climate reflects the way things are done in a particular work environment …[it] reflects the surface features of organisational culture. Climate can be measured and changed in organisational development can be measured and changed in organisational development programs whereas culture is extremely difficult to directly measure and change in a desired direction (Cotton, 2004).

For Cotton and Hart however, it follows that organisational 'health' is dependent on organisational climate, so that strategies of prevention, early intervention and injury management, and developing leadership ability will improve organisational climate and health. Rather than focussing on particular kinds of behaviours such as bullying or harassment, they are seeking to, and focusing, on climate improvement as a means of dealing with these kinds of deviant behaviour, especially in smaller workplaces (Cotton, 2004, 2005).

In recent years *trade unions* have moved from dealing with reported bullying on a case-by-case basis toward developing processes and systems of responding to workplace bullying. In Australia the Dignity at Work Charter was launched in 2004, while in the UK the giant union AMICUS has launched a comprehensive Dignity at Work Program funded by the Department of Trade and Industry and under the auspices of the Andrea Adams Trust. Bullying scholars are involved in working with major companies and employer associations in undertaking research, training and evaluation of the program. With its multi-party involvement and commitment to thoroughness, the Dignity at Work program is a model for other countries. (Dignity at Work website)

There is thus extensive research and analysis from a number of disciplinary areas (see also Kelly, 2005). Each of these brings particular insights which have the potential to illuminate aspects of bullying and so lessen or mitigate its incidence, but to a fair extent they are quite separate from each other, with very little cross-fertilisation. Thus Catanzariti's thoroughgoing legal research has been presented to law conferences, while that of Cotton and Hart, for example, has been circulated among psychologists. Not only is the research fragmented, but there is minimal research in disciplines most relevant to workplace bullying, those areas most concerned with employment, that is human resource management (HRM) and industrial relations (IR)

HRM and IR and the dearth of bullying research

Barring the occasional foray there has been almost no research into bullying by IR or HRM scholars. Despite its close links with organisational psychology, it is perhaps less surprising in HRM where research has tended to focus on activities which are seen to have direct effect on employee effectiveness and workplace efficiency. Thus while a bullying workplace has negative effects on effectiveness and efficiency, it has not been identified in the HRM literature as an issue of direct concern. In part this reflects the unitarist assumptions of much HRM research in which conflict is not an inherent aspect of the workplace, and managerial rights are wholly legitimate, As well, in recent years, the focus on commitment and performance has meant that measurements of good or best practice are defined in terms of short-term outputs (see e.g. Laverty, 2004; May et al., 2003). It is curious that bullying is also common among human resource managers, and yet at the same time managers tend to demean the extent or effect of bullying. A recent survey of bullying in higher education in the UK found that 75 per cent of academics and researchers had observed bullying while 40 per cent

claimed they were experiencing bullying. The response of one HR manager was, "There is a fine line between bullying and managing underperformance: how often does action taken to address a person's failure to adequately carry out his/her duties result in a claim of harassment?", (THES, 2005), a view with which other personnel managers concurred in an informal survey. Such approaches perhaps explain the dearth of concern by HR scholars and practitioners.

It is less clear why there has been little or no research in industrial relations, the study of all matters pertaining to work, (Adams, 1993) or the study of job regulation. (Flanders, 1975) Industrial relations scholars and professionals generally lay claim to assumptions of social justice, equity and fairness for employees in their research and practice. As Edwards (2003) notes "IR research has been predicated on the assumption that the [employment] relationship is one of conflict, power, and inequality". Unlike HRM which is ideologically tied to a pro-business approach, IR is researched from multiple ideological viewpoints, although it is probably safe to assert that a majority of IR scholars give primacy to employees' interests. A foundation for many IR scholars draws from the Webbs' definition of a trade union "… maintaining and improving the conditions of … working lives" (Webb, 1965, p.1).

At first sight, then it would seem that bullying, especially that by superiors which research suggests constitutes over 70 per cent of events, would be a prime target for industrial relations research (Rayner and Cooper, 1997; Glendinning, 2001; Wornham, 2003). On the other hand, the focus of much IR research is on institutions and the structures, rights and processes of those institutions. In recent years industrial relations research has continued to consider questions pertaining to job regulation, perhaps because it has become more important with the decline in collectivism, the individualisation of employment and the move away form fairness to employees as a significant principle in public policy. However, not all research has focused on institutions and processes of regulation, with particular kinds of issues-based research having always been apparent. In particular industrial relations research has taken up issues of disadvantage, such as that for women and migrant workers, or those affected by low pay or employment insecurity. More recently attention has been paid to family-friendly workplaces. These are clearly issues which relate to the conditions of working lives. What differentiates them from issues such as workplace bullying is that in the main there is a definable group – women, young workers, parents. Moreover these labour market groups are readily definable for policy-makers, so there is an opportunity to use research to influence public policy.

By contrast bullying is not only relatively diffuse in its conceptualisation, it is also not confined to any particular section of society – a plethora of empirical research shows that employees in many industries and at all levels are subjected to bullying. Because the nature and effect of bullying are diffuse and not widely understood its importance and negative effects are perhaps under-estimated by employers and researchers.

Moreover, the 'ownership' or the organisational responsibility, of bullying varies considerably. In some cases it is through the HR manager, or the manager responsible for design and administration of grievance procedures, while in others it is OHS or other departments such as EEO which take responsibility for bullying policies and procedures. A review of the websites of Australian universities for example, revealed that in the great majority, workplace bullying was placed under the auspices of EEO / Diversity sections, despite the fact that bullying is not necessarily an EEO or diversity issue. The lack of natural champions perhaps explains further why bullying is not being addressed effectively. In many ways the lack of ownership or widespread concern over bullying is similar to approaches of professionals and researchers to sexual harassment and racism before legalistic responses were developed. While such deviance still exists in the workplace, it has arguably been

lessened greatly because there are, on the surface at least, legal remedies and social and political mores which reject overt sexism and racism.

Yet as was shown above, bullying across a continuum of behaviours is widespread, destructive and costly to individuals and organisations. As the nature of work and employment continue to change in response to increased competition and decreased public protection, (Marchington, et al., 2005), the potential for bullying will increase. In order to avoid the 'low road' of workplace bullying, greater awareness and more effective responses must be developed. At present, while there is considerable research from several fields of study, there is little integration of that research, further reinforcing the low profile of bullying. The near absence of IR and HRM scholars is of further concern. Such scholars with a strong understanding of core aspects of employment – of management structures and cultures, of workplace and organisational communication, employee orientations to work and motivation, employee rights and the nature of conflict, cooperation and unequal power relations, – can provide insights which are not well explicated in legal studies or psychology. It is the same with the absence of research from scholars with expertise in ethics. It is arguable that bullying is wholly unethical, but there has only been marginal research into this, although there is considerable potential to add insights. (See e.g. Provis, 2004) Thus while organisations such as trade unions have important insights, their effect would be strengthened if augmented by rigorous research from scholars in a variety of fields.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the nature and extent of workplace bullying and the nature of research into this destructive phenomenon. It was shown that bullying can take multiple forms, and that for some forms of bullying the bullies can be coached to alter their bullying behaviours. Other forms of bullying however, reflect psychopathic behaviours which are unlikely to change, regardless of coaching. Moreover, because of the costs of bullying, there is much gain in changing behaviours, climates and cultures so that bullying is de-legitimised. Workplace bullying only rarely kills bullied employees, but there is a wealth of evidence to show that it highly destructive, costly and unethical. Besides the consistent work of bullying professionals and scholars, one of the most important responses to the growth of bullying appears to be the UK multi-party integrated approach where business, AMICUS, Department of Trade and Industry, scholars and professionals are working together to introduce Dignity at Work. In Australia, greater integration of research and practice, closer links between practitioners and researchers, and greater involvement of scholars from other fields of study, particularly industrial relations and human resource management could have a positive influence in reducing the incidence and impact of workplace bullying.

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